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Afghanistan remembered

Even some of the president's more seasoned foreign policy supporters were beginning to wonder: Is it possible that we are actually aiding the Afghan rebels in their fight against the Soviets without somebody in the press, or on the Senate Intelligence Committee, filing a freedom of information request and spilling all the details of the operation on the evening news? Or does the silence simply mean that the Reagan administration has wimped out and is providing the freedom fighters with little or no aid at all?

"I couldn't believe that after all we had said about helping the guerrillas and being tough on the Russians, we weren't really doing much to help," a Reagan aide admits. "It was outrageous."

Indeed it was. According to recent published reports, however, this outrage has ended; in fact, it never really existed. The reports, of course, are neither confirmed nor denied by the U.S. government. Nevertheless, it appears that as of December, the Reagan administration quietly began stepping up military support for the Afghan resistance and is now spending from \$15 to \$25 million a year on supplies for the guerrilla forces.

It's too bad that yet another covert CIA operation has been un-coverted, and not just on principle. The leaked reports of U.S. arms shipments—which travel through Pakistan, and involve hardware purchased from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—cannot help but endanger the tenuous supply routes that have been worked out, not to mention the lives of some of our agents.

The leaks also make it tougher for some

of the countries involved to continue: The Pakistanis, for example, have been the object of regular Kremlin threats to come into Pakistan and cut off the arms flow if the Pakistani government does not. And the Kremlin loves any excuse to pressure the stability-poor, oil-rich states of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It's also too bad that we aren't providing even more aid than we are. The Soviets now have more than 100,000 troops bogged down in what looks like an endless struggle. Soviet spokesmen admit they can already feel the impact of limited U.S. aid. Another turn of the screw couldn't hurt.

This is particularly true because of what the takeover has cost the Soviets. More than 15,000 Soviet soldiers have died in Afghanistan since the Kremlin launched its 1979 attack.

Yet what the Soviets have suffered is small next to the punishment the Kremlin has inflicted: thousands of painful deaths by chemical poisoning; regular torture campaigns. There are children with arms and legs blown off by booby-trap bombs; one family in five has been forced to flee its home.

We don't see much of this in the United States. While no sparrow falls in Central America or the Middle East without making front pages all over the world, the Soviets have been unusually successful in keeping reporters and photographers out of Afghanistan. But they cannot keep the Afghans and their plight out of the geopolitical picture that is deciding the future for all of us. Fortunately, the State Department seems to be, at last, letting itself notice.